

The Shimmer of Night

“Seeing is an act”, wrote the surrealist Paul Nougé. To look is a primal urge that engages the imagination and as such is difficult to control. From an early age we watch, openly and covertly, brazenly and timidly, in a ceaseless quest – whether it’s through a hole in the wall or the lens of a camera makes little difference (except when the look is turned into an image). The visual sense is paramount in all our efforts to experience the world, to expand the realm of human awareness. Paco Carrascosa has “succumbed” to this desire, many times over, so far compiled in his five- and seven-part collections of photos, *Johnny Walker on the Beach* (2640 illustrations) and *‘Black & White’ with Friends* (3696 illustrations). In the final part of his great trilogy on the joys of curiosity he delves into the sensuous depths of the night, into the dichotomies of the dark and garish, the visible and invisible, the permitted and forbidden. “He broaches life on a lower floor,” as I once wrote, “beneath the decorum and elegance, to create a new living body which is very much his own.” In this volume, he engages with the dark, the other side, he sidles along the edge of what is feasible, what is possible, leaving an occasional footprint in the impossible. Let’s follow him into the 2640 images of “Jack Daniels and Mr Freud”, into the views, insights, overviews, sideways glances, searching stares, subtle looks, painful grimaces – enticed and entranced, dazzled and daunted, clear and clouded.

And what we see are office buildings, steel and glass towers, interiors brightly lit or thinly veiled by curtains. It is the hour of the “rearguard” of cleaning men and women, teams of cleaners, working around those who remain at their posts, all but immobilized in their office chairs, transfixed by the screens before them, from 5pm till 10pm. The house, the building, the office tower become lamps,

towers of light, a designer grid on which we can follow, over multiple double-page spreads, life in service, in admin, in accounts, at the trading desk. Amid glass partitions, white walls and binders, jackets and blazers draped on chairbacks or hung from clothes hangers to one side. Men and women are glimpsed sideways, their functions clearly recognizable, their identities far less so.

But we also see a pizza stand, doner kebabs, drinks after work with music, a local shop, a hairdresser, a station platform, an elderly woman in her apartment, a gym, an entrance hall, an exit stairway, loners, couples, groups, but always offices, offices, and more offices, an amusement arcade, a children's playground, a bench for waiting, love for sale – our gaze wanders back and forth, looks straight ahead, glances up and down, left and right, focuses, pinpoints, realistic, lucid, giving way, softening, paling, growing hazy like a painting of a misty scene. The gaze – his gaze, our gaze – takes in façades, ranges along rows of windows, scans the platform, the waiting passengers, the evening traffic, lingers on a window, once, twice, a third time, many times, then cuts to the street, seen from high above, looking down on the road glistening, glittering, shining in the rain, in the glow of car headlights, into the depth, the distant horizon, then back up on the focal plane, steeply upwards, finally cutting sharply to the moon, the half-moon, the quarter-moon, the full moon, ending in pure, shimmering light, rhythm, luminous music, like free, wild electrified scores.

The world, the people, their activities, the furniture, the architecture, the waiting, managing and sitting, the hurrying – all this travels like a slow train through the night, passing us by, arranged in lines or stacked, window by window, window in window, window behind window, shining out, layers of lights, of signs, of life, hand gestures, head angles, body postures, thin lips, folded arms,

but also the laughter of children. And then all at once we are in a different town, a different country, in a culture of being outside, living outdoors, eating outdoors, watching TV outdoors, also late at night, many people together, seldom alone. The light changes, in a strange way growing clearer, colder, more neon-tinged, though the mood is lighter, becomes warmer, more human. In between, the gaze is torn away, turns towards water, towards the sea.

During the day the façades are light, the windows dark, opaque. At night, it is the other way round. Façades are drained of colour, become darkened, at times turning black, and the windows are lit up, the life behind them shines out, in contrast with the dark surface. This flip switch is also to be found in photography: The brighter, lighter and balmier the weather, the stronger the picture burns, sometimes burning all the colour from the sky. Sometimes it is so strong, it becomes difficult to discern the edges of the picture in print. The effect can be counteracted: in the past by means of lens filters, today in post-production. Nevertheless, the dry föhn image flares and dazzles our eyes. A night-time shot works in exactly the opposite way. The black night – the landscape, the façade – holds the picture firmly in its grip, almost overpowering it, giving it heft and weight. The blackness frames the picture too starkly and, for those still awake to see, transforms it into a lantern. Single shining fragments of the image force their way out and stand in contrast with the black screen, producing a template that only appears where artificial light is burning, shining out, flaring and catching the eye.

The black surround emphasizes the framing, cropped from the whole, from the impenetrable fabric, from the tangle of reality. Like a scissor cut, the black emphasizes the light patches, heightens and highlights them. An intense framing, an accentuation of the light

and events unfolding in the light. In terms of approach this is a revelation, a powerful force, although usually revealing humdrum events, conventional behaviour and ordinary perception: working, hurrying, waiting, eating, watching, talking. Action and inaction. Appearance and non-appearance. Being private in public and – conversely – being public in private. Paco Carrascosa moves through this world like a shadow, like a nimble tomcat with a tiny digital camera. He is seldom seen himself. Hardly anyone notices or responds as he observes life by night, recording, visualizing and compiling it in pairs of pictures, quartets and sextets of pictures, forming short silent narratives of the formal and private life of the city in the evening and after work. Beyond the dynamic of the double-page spreads, he composes a song of night life, which is most effective, at its most insistent, when one views the 2640 pictures as a film with frames that change every two seconds. A canto of evening life, of the five or six hours when everything continues, but some currencies change, and sometimes the terms of being turn.

Seeing is, as I said, an act. Photography is an act. Both are attempts to perceive the world, to expand the senses, to come to terms with a slice of the world. Like every action, this is ambiguous, switching between seeing and seeking, experiencing and seizing, observing and accessing intermingle in the act of clarifying, elucidating with touching, with visual possession. The past century was the time of curiosity, of visual desire, par excellence. Photography, film and video were and remain the defining media (now with explosive force thanks to the accelerators of new channels of distribution, the ultimate total coverage with no limits on time). All these media are based on the act of looking, on curiosity and the fascination of looking as the crucial impulse. We seem driven by an unceasing urge to prove that curiosity is the “origin of all efforts towards, all

fantasies about expanding the human senses” and is also “proof of the indissoluble link between aesthetics, eroticism and creativity” (as Volker Roloff put it).

Yes, these are undeniably voyeuristic times we live in. But the concept has evolved. At the beginning of the 20th century, Sigmund Freud described the child’s interest in watching its parents having sex as an (experienced or imagined) primal scene which would later have a decisive influence on desire and wishes, lust, power and the will to know, the aesthetic, erotic and cultural practice. In that, he was actually affirming how primal, how “natural” is the visual sense. But in the course of the last century, the positive or at least neutral concept of the observer, of the voyeur as a human being looking with curiosity, has changed into the negative idea of a person who is watching for strange, invasive reasons and in the act of looking is abusing the “observed”. In the discourses on Freud’s psychoanalysis and its many consequences, reflections on curiosity have not simply developed, but over time also become pathologized.

The poststructuralist Jean-Luc Nancy, by contrast, discusses the relationship between image and power. In his essay “Image and Power”, he writes that images spring from a mixture of visual force, power and violence. Images attract violence, he says, since they wish not only to represent, but also to show, be present and *monstrative*. “Every image is a *monstrance*. The image is monstrous,” he says and adds: “The image is the wondrous force-sign of an improbable presence irrupting from the heart of a restlessness in which nothing can be built. It is the force-sign of the unity without which there would be neither thing, nor presence, nor subject. But the unity of the thing, the presence and the subject is itself violent.”

Paco Carrascosa knows instinctively about this conflict situation, the new predicament, the mixture of wondrous force and power, especially

when taking photographs at night, from out of the darkness into the lit office, restaurant, room. Nonetheless, he dares to venture closer, gives way, shifts, he takes photographs with desire, with interest, but at the same time in a noticeably relaxed way, almost unintentionally. He loves the interplay of light and shadow, of sight and insight, of closeness and depth, but his photography rarely draws close to the invasive, the harmful – at least not from the point of view of the observer, the writer. Carrascosa is a “stray dog” with a sure instinct for what is doable. He does not bend, nor does he step into the trap. What he has created here is an unusual megadocument, a songbook of the urban evening, of the end of the day, of returning from work, of going home, to the bar, to a meal. Alone or with friends and colleagues. In solitude or in solidarity.

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